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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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The Philosopher's Stone

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group



Media and Ethics: The Shaping of our Ideas

-pdg

In the twentieth century, some philosophers began to shift their thinking about ethics away from what principles of morality there should be or how we should live to questions of the objectivity or subjectivity of moral judgments. They became more interested in what logical connections there are, if any, between moral beliefs and factual beliefs, questioning if one could ever decide whether moral beliefs reflect some objective truth or whether they are totally dependent on individuals and their personal desires.

Of course, questions about the nature of truth, relativism, and absolutism go back at least as far as Plato. But most post-Christian Western philosophers, at least until the Utilitarians, believed that there existed moral absolutes of some sort.

These questions are not merely

the concerns of theorists and academics. As we awaken each morning to headlines of scandals involving everyone from the local businessman to the Hollywood film star to the President of the United States, we find ourselves surrounded by moral confusion.

And if we cannot even agree on the nature of moral questioning, then how much harder is it to take action in situations demanding ethical decisions? Today, our moral sense is fundamentally an amalgam of influences from parents, peers, religious and school institutions, and, perhaps most influential of all, the media. Even our sense of what is true or not true about the world around us is shaped in part by news organizations. But can these news organizations really determine the *truth* about any given event? What did the media, and consequently most Americans, believe was the truth about Richard Jewel at the time of the Olympics bombing in Atlanta? What is the truth about O. J. Simpson? Is he the affable, photogenic sports hero he was purported to be before his trial for murder or the sadistic killer he was portrayed as afterwards.

Both conceptions were media creations widely accepted as accurate representations at the time of their dissemination. And even if the media can approach the truth of an event, are they not susceptible to the same corruptions as we all are. Powerful business, political, and even social interests affect decisions concerning the reporting of the news on a daily basis. And with the advent of the Internet as a tool for the publication of ideas, the line between advertising and fact (and fact and fiction) becomes even more blurred.

Adding to these difficulties are the effects on our beliefs of television, movies, cd's, and tabloid journalism, whose producers are motivated almost entirely by money and little else. Too often these industries ignore the ethical considerations of the effects of their products. Yet, in a free country, one hesitates to impose restrictions on speech. It is a dilemma which seems unsolvable.

Come to Gamble Hall, Room 203, on Tuesday, February 16th, at 8:00 p.m. and share your ideas.

Quotations

The United States is unusual among the industrial democracies in the rigidity of the system of ideological control—"indoctrination," we might say—exercised through the mass media.

Noam Chomsky *Language and Responsibility*, "Politics" (1979).

If I use the media, even with tricks, to publicize a black youth being shot in the back in Teaneck, New Jersey . . . then I should be praised for it, and it's more of a comment on them than me that it would take tricks to make them cover the loss of life.

Rev. Al Sharpton *Independent on Sunday* (London, 21 April 1991).

Commercial jazz, soap opera, pulp fiction, comic strips, the movies set the images, mannerisms, standards, and aims of the urban masses. In one way or another, everyone is equal before these cultural machines; like technology itself, the mass media are nearly universal in their incidence and appeal. They are a kind of common denominator, a kind of scheme for pre-scheduled, mass emotions.

C. Wright Mills . *White Collar*, ch. 15, sct. 3 (1951).

The corporate grip on opinion in the United States is one of the wonders of the Western World. No First World country has ever managed to eliminate so entirely from its media all objectivity—much less dissent.

Gore Vidal *A View from the Diner's Club*, "Cue the Green God, Ted" (1991).

Some Resources

Media Ethics

<http://www.unomaha.edu/~cwallen/ethics/index.htm>

The Ethics Center: Readings on the Internet (an Internet site devoted to ethics)
www.taknosys.com/ethics/index.htm

Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest (Critical Studies in Communication and in the Cultural Industries

Jeremy Iggers, WestView Press, 1998

Controversies in Media Ethics

David Gordon, Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1998

Ethics Resources on the Net

www.depaul.edu/ethics/ethbl.html

Visit our Website!

[Http://www.thales1.armstrong.edu/pdg](http://www.thales1.armstrong.edu/pdg)

Contributions

The PDG is always open to new ideas. If you've got any submissions or suggestions, please e-mail us at one of the addresses below or drop a note in the thought box in the Writing Center in Gamble 109.

Faculty Advisor:

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Meeting Times for Spring Semester

All meetings are at 8 p.m.
in Room 203 in Gamble
Hall.

Tuesday, February 16
Tuesday, March 9
Tuesday, March 30